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Managua's Central Problem

By Arturo José Cruz

The debate in the United States about the crisis in my country, Nicaragua, is dangerously distorted. I have recently traveled across the country, speaking to college students, international affairs experts, labor leaders, businessmen and journalists. I was encouraged to find that the American people seem at last to grasp the importance of what is taking place in Central America. But I was also deeply troubled.

Everywhere I went, the people I spoke to seemed blindly preoccupied with military issues. Is the Reagan Administration planning an invasion? Who is winning Nicaragua's civil war? Are the Sandinistas importing advanced aircraft from the Soviet Union? Will the Contadora countries — Colombia, Mexico, Panama, Venezuela — deal adequately with the militarization of the region?

These questions are obviously important, but they do not address the central problem facing Nicaragua today: how can the Nicaraguan people achieve the democracy for which they have struggled so long? Until

that is accomplished, there will be no peace in Central America. United States politicians and military strategists should have learned at least this much from the last century of failed collaboration with Central American strongmen promising stability.

When I began my speaking tour, in mid-November, I counseled critics of the Sandinistas to allow a "grace period" after the Nicaraguan elections — to wait and see what would emerge. I expected the new de facto Government to move in a totalitarian direction, but I feared hasty criticism from the Nicaraguan opposition and worried that the Reagan Administration might make things worse by strengthening its stand against the Sandinistas before the people of Central America were sure of their own attitudes. Alas, I badly underestimated the vigor with which the newly elected Nicaraguan Government would proceed to repress

its opponents and militarize the state.

The Sandinistas are evidently determined to ignore the democratic yearnings of the Nicaraguan people. They have staged an electoral charade and refused to allow serious opponents to participate. They have begun an open buildup of Soviet arms, pressed ahead with the militarization of Nicaraguan life and resumed their censorship of the country's only free newspaper. They also insist that negotiations with the United States and the Contadora countries can have no bearing on their treatment of the Nicaraguan opposition.

Clearly, I underestimated the Sandinistas. But I also underestimated the vigorous reaction their new repression would provoke among democrats in Central America. Their response to my cautionary remarks brought it home to me: one Costa Rican newspaper, *La Nación*, went so far as to chide me for "naïveté."

The vast majority of Central American democrats, it is clear, no longer believe that the Sandinistas are entitled to the benefit of doubt. Despite the growing danger of regional war, the peoples of Central America are simply not willing to tolerate an increasingly totalitarian government in their midst.

This brings me back to my original point: the people of the United States — and especially those who share my yearning for peaceful solutions — must recognize that the political character of the Nicaraguan regime is the key to the crisis of the region. So long as there is no possibility for freedom in Nicaragua, the armed rebellion against the Sandinistas will continue to grow. The Sandinistas, for their own internal reasons, will draw their Soviet and Cuban patrons ever more deeply into Central America. They will also, in time, provoke conflicts with their neighbors in order to justify ever more repressive measures at home.

The problem in Nicaragua is not MIG's and assault helicopters. It is, fundamentally, the absence of liberty — the character of the Government that will put such weapons to use.

What can the United States do? Congress is sadly wrong if it imagines that it can obtain peace by cutting off aid to the Nicaraguan insurgents. The insurgency is no longer a product of United States intervention: it is the revolt of Nicaraguans against oppression by other Nicaraguans.

Those who oppose support to the insurgents have a moral obligation to insist that the Sandinistas restore Nicaragua's liberties and that the Communist world take its hands off our country. □

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